Good manners make everybody comfortable

“Take your elbows off the table. Don’t talk with your mouth full. Look people in the eye when you speak to them. Write your thank-you notes.”

“You’ve probably heard all or most of those orders from your parents. And even though you do them, you might wonder why grown-ups make such a fuss about good manners.

“I think manners are important, but I wouldn’t like to be one of those high-society English people with their pinkie stuck out,” said Isabel Uriagereka Herburger, 11, of Washington. “For myself at home, I could care less about manners, but at other people’s homes I’m more careful.”

Manners are about more than using the right fork or not slurping when you... Continued on the next page

Emma Leigh Bossard, 7, of Gaithersburg sips tea in an etiquette class for children held at the Georgetown Safeway.
Why you need good manners

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drink. Those rules of etiquette might be expected in certain situations, but not doing those things isn't going to hurt anyone's feelings. Good manners are a way to show others that you care about them. Manners also make it easier for everyone to feel comfortable in social situations.

Think of manners as traffic lights for life, said Pier Forni, a professor at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore who has written books about manners. On the road, traffic lights turn a world full of cars moving in different directions into an orderly system that allows everyone to get where they are going.

“The rules of good manners are the traffic lights of human interaction,” Forni said. “They make it so that we don’t crash into one another in everyday behavior.”

Even cavemen used manners!

Manners have developed over tens of thousands of years as a key element of human society, and they might even have helped the species survive.

Early humans lived in groups in order to hunt, share food and keep one another warm. But to live so close together, Forni said, humans had to learn to think about others, not just themselves. Think of it this way: If every person in the group looked out for only himself, the group would fall apart.

Our distant ancestors developed behaviors to show others respect, fairness and kindness. Those have evolved into today’s manners. “You cannot have any kind of community if there are not some rules,” Forni said.

Manners for a new generation

Of course, manners have changed a lot through the years and are still changing. They are more relaxed than they were 100 years ago, for example, when good manners for kids meant never speaking unless an adult spoke to you first!

Some manners are still used even though the original reason for them is largely gone. Have you ever wondered why you’re told to keep your elbows off the table? The rule dates from the Middle Ages, Forni said, when tables often were just a big board placed on a stump. Leaning on the table with your elbows could easily tip the table and make everyone lose his food!

Today, it’s not good manners to text at the table, because it sends a message that you aren’t interested in the people around you. People felt just as strongly about that kind of thing before texting existed: President Jimmy Carter’s 9-year-old daughter, Amy, created a manners outcry more than 30 years ago when she was spotted reading at the table at a formal White House dinner.

Manners make friends

But even as they change, manners are always aimed at doing the same thing: making other people feel appreciated and respected, which also helps friendships develop.

“It’s a natural, built-in reward system,” explained Becca Czarniecki, who teaches manners and etiquette at Tea With Mrs. B in Bethesda. “It makes you, and those around you, feel good.” Could there be a better reason to mind your manners?

— Margaret Webb Pressler

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Becca Czarniecki shows Zhoie Hatton, 7, of Leesburg a proper handshake at a recent children’s etiquette tea at the Georgetown Safeway. Other participants included, from left, Kathleen Pryor, Channing Hughston, Caroline Hester (behind Channing), Leilani McAdams and Tommy Pryor. Czarniecki runs Tea With Mrs. B, a business that teaches manners and etiquette.