

# Don't let technology rob kids of social skills

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Not now, I'm texting.

We've all seen teens—and adults—immersed in their smartphones, oblivious to the world around them. However, it's not just a matter of distraction or impoliteness anymore. In a digital world, where the majority of communication is done through a keyboard or touch screen, many kids no longer understand the basics of simple conversation. As social media connects us to more people virtually, it's also creating a social skills deficit in our kids.

With so much communication happening online or via text, kids have few opportunities to see manners and good communication in action, and even fewer chances to practice.

So what can we do to make sure our kids have the social skills they need to thrive with family, friends, and on the job? As parents, we need to be more intentional than ever about teaching manners and the art of communication. We can help our kids succeed in a technologically-driven world that still values interpersonal communication. Consider this Parenting 2.0—here are a few ideas to get you started.

**Show them how it's done** and model good communication for your kids. That means shutting down Facebook while at the playground and being fully present in the moment. We can show

kids the basics of communication when we use “please” and “thank you” in our daily interactions, like at a restaurant or store, or with our kids when they put their toys away. They’ll see how to make eye contact when we have a conversation with a friend at the basketball game. The dinner table is also a great place to model and practice communication on a daily basis.

**Take time up-front for training** and your kids will be ready for social situations. Kids don’t instinctively know the p’s and q’s of good manners; it’s up to us to teach them how to greet adults, how to introduce themselves, and how to graciously accept compliments. Practice shaking hands and play games to focus on holding eye contact. Role-play how to ask questions and how to use a strong, clear voice. For older kids, talk about good topics and phrases to engage adults in polite small talk. And even though it seems like we don’t use our phones for actual talking much anymore, make sure to teach good phone manners as well.

**Practice makes polite**, so give your kids lots of chances to try out their new skills. With the holiday season in full swing, there will be many opportunities to put their new skills to work. Make sure your kids are prepared. Practice a few key phrases Emily can use at the neighborhood holiday party. Take turns shaking hands and making eye contact with Jack before you head out caroling. Turn the trek to Grandma’s house into a chance to come up with good small talk topics to use with the aunts and uncles. And if your kids forget to say thank you in the moment, come up with a small non-verbal sign ahead of time so you can remind them without embarrassing them.

**Raise your expectations...** after you’ve taken the time for training. When your kids have the basics of good communication mastered, it’s time to raise the bar on the manners and skills that you expect to see. Joey needs to write his own thank you notes for his birthday gifts – about five sentences long for a fifth grader, for example. When Sidney sees Mr. Smith at the grocery store, she needs to use his name when she greets him.

**Take a textcation.** Texting, social media and other technology is here to stay, but make sure you have clear, understood limits for its use. Let kids know how much tech time they are allowed each day and reveal consequences in advance for not adhering to your family rules. Keep certain times of the day free of phones and computers, and create quiet, technology-free zones in your house.

**Encourage your kids when you see progress.** Let them know you’ve noticed how hard they’ve been working on improving their skills. If we encourage our kids when we see them use good eye contact or gracefully accept a compliment, they’re more likely to keep up the good work in the future.

While cell phones, texting and social media become ubiquitous in everyday life, we don’t have to allow them to rob our kids of the social skills they’ll need throughout life. By taking time for up-front training and giving kids plenty of opportunities to practice their skills, we can set them up for success in a world that will always value good old-fashioned, face-to-face communication skills.