



Using Social Role Plays (Montessori “Grace and Courtesy Lessons”) to Support Executive Functions and Social Development

Domain 2 of the National School Readiness Indicators Report describes the necessary skills of Social and Emotional Development:

- Children’s knowledge of their own feelings and those of others
- The ability to develop positive relationships
- An interest in and demonstration of interpersonal skills needed to maintain positive relationships with adults and peers
- The capacity to engage and cooperate within a group
- The ability to demonstrate the skills needed to get along with peers (manage conflicts in a positive way)

How are these skills developed?

One highly effective technique is that of “Grace and Courtesy Lessons” As a student in our teacher-training course once said, “Grace and Courtesy are the analyzed movements of social life!”

- **Grace-** poise, consideration, and dignity **from within oneself**
- **Courtesy-** poise, attentiveness, and graciousness **extended towards others**

Grace and courtesy lessons are little social role plays which give children the opportunity to practice what to say and what to do in any given social situation. They might be as simple as how to respond when given something (“Thank you!”) to as complex as how to welcome a visitor into the classroom. They give children security and confidence in knowing how to act appropriately and relieve the anxiety of uncertainty or embarrassment.

Often times, as adults, we either assume children know how to behave and are simply choosing not to, or that children are incapable of behaving graciously and courteously towards others. In reality, children need only to be shown how to act appropriately, given the opportunity to practice without shame or embarrassment, and be given opportunities to spontaneously extend themselves to others, and handle themselves with respect and dignity.

Grace and Courtesy lessons are an ideal vehicle for support the Core Executive Functions:

- **Working Memory-**
 - children will remember what they practiced; practice leads to automaticity
 - remember what happened last time, connecting past to present
 - remember that “this is one of the times where...”



- **Cognitive Flexibility –**
 - children will adapt a specific example of how to respond or act to meet the needs of the current situation,
 - create variations on the practiced lessons thereby making a “script” their own voice,
 - children will generalize actions and words from one situation to another
- **Inhibitory Control-**
 - children can practice controlling their impulses because they have an alternative response

The core executive functions - inhibitory control, working memory, cognitive flexibility, attention, and self-discipline are more important than curriculum content. Grace and Courtesy Lessons offer an opportunity for children to learn the social skills they need and to practice and develop core executive functions- the most important school readiness capacities.

Programs with the best approaches to supporting EFs are *“those which engage student’s passionate interests, bringing them joy and pride; help to alleviate stress and assist children with calmer, healthier responses; and give a sense of belonging and social acceptance...”* (Diamond and Lee, 2011)

Types of Grace and Courtesy Lessons

There are three basic types of social skills that can be developed into Grace and Courtesy lessons:

Manners– Such as:

- What to say when someone gives you something (Thank you!)
- What to say when you need to get past someone (Excuse me.)
- What to do when you cough/sneeze
- How to push in your chair
- How to invite someone to join in
- How to decline an invitation

Classroom Procedures – Such as:

- How to sit in a group
- How to stand in a line
- How to walk around someone’s work rug
- How to get the teacher’s attention

Conflicts – Such as:

- What to do when someone says “You’re not my friend”
- What to say if someone takes your toy
- What to say if someone hurts you
- What to do when someone calls you a name

Basic Technique for Grace and Courtesy Lessons

1. Identify the behavior/situation you want to address
 - Through observation
 - Through experience and anticipation
2. Identify what it is that you want the children to do
 - This requires thoughtful preparation
3. Enlist the help of other adults/capable children to help if needed
 - Classroom assistant
 - Experienced children
4. Gather a small group of children
5. *“I’m going to show you what to do/say when----“*
6. Act it out
7. Give each child the opportunity to practice the role play
8. *“Now you know what to do when ----“*

Considerations:

- All adults must consistently model the behavior/action.
- Repeat the role plays until you see it happening spontaneously in the classroom.
- Do not single out the “target child”
- Do not explain, reason, or give a rational- this is not appropriate for children under 6.
- Keep each role play short and fun!

Why does this work? Consider the potential of “mirror neurons” – neurons that fire when we see others doing an action and when we do the action ourselves.

“By the time they are two, children learn quickly and primarily through imitation, which lets them absorb far more knowledge and skill than could ever possibly be explained to them verbally. They then spend years practicing what they have learned. *When you realize that children have a system of neurons that is capable of learning by simply seeing, hearing, touching, then you begin to see that the world itself is the teacher*, with you, as the parent, in a starring role. Your child’s mirror neurons resonate with your words, intentions, and moods by your children through their mirror neuron system as they watch you from moment to moment.” – Blakeslee and Blakeslee, *The Body Has a Mind of its Own*, p. 172.



Closing thoughts from Adele Diamond, a leading expert in the study of attention and executive function in children, in her recent paper: *The Evidence Base for Improving School Outcomes by Addressing the Whole Child and by Addressing Skills and Attitudes, Not Just Content*; Early Education and Development, 2010.

“Children learn what they live. The James–Lange Theory of Emotion (James, 1884; Lange, 1887) argued long ago that if you act like you are good, you will become good. It is true that the greatest joy comes from making others happy.

The way for children to learn that truth is for children to experience it—to regularly, **every day, do simple things to be nice to others, whether it is holding the door for someone carrying a heavy load, letting someone get ahead of them in line, saying “hello” or “thank you”** to someone handing them their lunch, or complimenting someone’s smile—and experiencing how absolutely terrific they feel when they receive a smile in return. It is immediately intuitive that if you want others to be happy, you should be kind and considerate toward them.

It is initially counterintuitive that if you want to be happy, you should be kind and considerate towards others. Children only learn the truth of that by experiencing it. If we want more kind and considerate children, we need to give them kind and considerate role models, and **we need to give children boundless opportunities to practice kindness** and to experience for themselves how happy making someone else happy makes them.”

“One way to empower students, to give them self-confidence, is to give them doable challenges; opportunities to succeed at things they know are difficult. For example, if a kindergarten teacher assumes that children of only 5 years of age are too young to exercise self-control or self-regulation, and so structures situations so that the children do not need to exercise self-regulation, that provides the children no opportunity to practice self-regulation and to thereby get better at it. **If a teacher provides children with opportunities to exercise self-control and self-regulation, but provides no supports or scaffolds to help children’s inchoate self-regulation abilities, the children will likely fail.**