
Common Courtesies: Teaching Young People American Etiquette Through 4-H

Kelley A. McCord

The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA
kam41@psu.edu

Jan Scholl

The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA



Common Courtesies: Teaching Young People American Etiquette Through 4-H

Kelley A. McCord and Jan Scholl
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract: The new youth resource guide, *"Common Courtesies and First Impressions: A 4-H Life Skills Activity Guide to Modern American Etiquette,"* is designed to help teenagers understand the significance and positive impact of using proper etiquette in today's society. Though designed with 4-H members in mind, the guide employs the social theory of learning by emphasizing learning in a social setting with a group of one's peers. It could be employed easily in any youth group setting, including Campfire, Boy & Girl Scouts, or Parks & Rec. It will help to build positive social skills by providing answers to such questions as how to behave and react in social situations.

Introduction

"We live in a new society, as different from the one our parents grew up in as the computer is different from the typewriter," wrote Mitchell (2004). "And the realities of this new American society require a new approach to the old concepts of civility." *"Common Courtesies,"* a 4-H project with wide-ranging application, provides this new approach. Aimed specifically at middle school and high school aged children, it teaches etiquette skills at precisely the time when they are becoming more aware of how other people see them and therefore are more willing to learn how to improve their image.

Many people confuse the terms etiquette and manners, thinking they mean the same thing. Etiquette refers to the code of rules governing social interaction, accepted customs or the actual practices of a culture (Columbia Encyclopedia Online, 2007; Mitchell, 2004). Manners, a type of behavior based on kindness and respect, convey consideration for others. In the United States it is our custom or proper etiquette to shake hands upon meeting someone; in Japan and other Asian countries the proper greeting is to bow. Polite people adapt their manners to the differences in custom, making the greeting more comfortable for everyone involved. Whether following the etiquette of your culture or another culture, manners are genuine and sincere actions that give etiquette meaning.

Project Overview: Goals & Benefits

Over time, some behaviors become outmoded, but the fundamental purpose of etiquette – making the world a more pleasant place to live – remains. In a span of less than 300 years, society has moved from the agricultural age through the industrial age (1700-1900) and the information age (1830-1980) to the connection age (1972-present). The connection age can be defined as the time period beginning with the advent of the internet and the ensuing ability to make a *connection* with each other in a fundamentally new way (Drucker, 1999; Meyer, 1997).

Greater connectivity has many consequences, including a wider range of cultural interaction, the growth and role of women in the workforce, and the introduction of new technologies to the world. These changes have altered what we consider socially acceptable behavior. In the past, young people learned etiquette at home and, until the 1960s, in schools and colleges. The advent of dual working parents and single parent households as well as increased homework and greater pressure to succeed academically have reduced the amount of time available to teach children manners and etiquette at home. Etiquette has similarly disappeared from our schools in favor of subjects considered more rigorously academic. Moreover, constantly changing perceptions about what is acceptable, brought on in part by the increasing diversity of American society, have left many families feeling ill-equipped to teach etiquette and manners. Children suffer because of this loss: over a lifetime this may cause embarrassment, lost friendships, or failure in career advancement (Martin, 1999; Mitchell, 2004).

Etiquette is also of great significance in the professional arena. Today, many businesses find it necessary to employ etiquette trainers for their employees. Etiquette trainers address some of the basics of how to dress, act, eat, and converse. Such instruction also goes much deeper, however, including lessons on topics such as effective business correspondence, demonstrating self-confidence, projecting a positive attitude, and conference protocol. The employment of such trainers emphasizes the lack of proper etiquette among today's younger employees as well as the continuing importance of etiquette in the business world. As global society expands, people who demonstrate good manners, especially when facing widely divergent social and cultural situations, have greater opportunities for success.

Etiquette remains extremely important in both the social and professional settings. Yet few existing 4-H projects fulfill families' needs, and the information about manners and etiquette available to clubs is similarly dissatisfying. Too often, these sources are out of date or too extensive, while others fail to address the positive results gained from learning etiquette.

"*Common Courtesies*" fills this void by teaching 4-H members how to behave courteously and with a confidence that inspires respect for and from others. It accomplishes these goals by providing instruction about introductions, communication skills, basic civility, and other common social interactions. It also broaches modern issues, discussing proper cell phone etiquette and encouraging pre-teens and teens to adjust their manners to our increasingly diverse society.

Project Overview: Activities

The activities in "*Common Courtesies*" instruct pre-teens and teens on proper behavior in these social or professional settings:

- First impressions and introductions
- Correspondence, communication, and cell phone etiquette

- Table manners and setting the table
- Friends, family, and how to act in unusual or awkward situations such as a death
- Respecting others: etiquette in relation to diversity and culture

The project's activities embrace 4-H's "learn by doing" philosophy. Although they allow for both individual and group learning opportunities, special emphasis is placed on the beneficial aspects of the social theory of learning as articulated by Wenger (1998), who has emphasized the ways in which communal identity can affect our patterns of learning. Activities range from group brainstorming about what etiquette is to physical activities, such as a handshake rehearsal and role playing. Pre-teens and teens will participate in activities that engage them in all four of Wenger's learning quadrants: experience, doing, belonging, and becoming. Each activity emphasizes how etiquette should be performed and *why* it is important to follow these social rules, reminding 4-H club members that correct etiquette can have a positive impact by bringing them respect, a feeling of belonging, and even power in certain social and professional situations.

While "*Common Courtesies*" will be useful to pre-teens and teens generally, it lends itself particularly to students participating in group activities such as those encouraged by 4-H, Campfire, Boy & Girl Scouts, or other social groups. Consider these examples:

4-H members create and design invitations, providing them with the experience of learning the correct invitation format as well as an opportunity to express their creativity. Members use these invitations to invite parents or other interested adults to the celebration dinner following the completion of the "*Common Courtesies*" project.

Club members determine how schools and communities have made it easier by providing resources for people with disabilities to make their way and participate in society. Sharing their findings and providing ideas for improvements encourages youth to follow-up and propose additional plans for improvement.

Observing the reactions of other people and sharing how the members felt while participating in the activity is beneficial as well as fun and challenging for members and leaders.

Implementation

The "*Common Courtesies*" 4-H project should be conducted over several club meetings. Individual meetings are based on a variety of themes: introductions, correspondence, modern technology, table manners/table settings, friends and family, diversity, and other social circumstances. The project culminates in a celebration dinner, allowing the club members to put into practice all the knowledge they have acquired.

"*Common Courtesies*" is designed for middle and high school 4-H youth clubs of any size. Youth are divided into small groups (if club size is large) and guided, assisted, or taught by club leaders as necessary. The project can also be adapted to compliment other 4-H projects or an ambassador program by selecting a relevant activity from "*Common Courtesies*" and applying the activity to the club's current needs.

Conclusion

"*Common Courtesies*" was designed to teach appropriate etiquette behavior through role and game playing. This project can be used in all youth groups and could potentially affect several thousand members. Completion of the project helps improve members' communication skills and conflict resolution skills. Other benefits from completing the project include building self-esteem and fostering self-confidence. Self-improvement can be tested through participants' reflection and evaluation.

This 4-H project will become available in the spring of 2008. For more information about the project, contact Jan Scholl, Associate Professor Agricultural and Extension Education, 323 Ag Admin Building, University Park, PA 16802, jscholl@psu.edu.

References

- Columbia Encyclopedia Online. Retrieved June, 2007, from <http://www.answers.com/topic/etiquette?cat=entertainment>
- Drucker, P. (1999, October). Beyond the Information Revolution, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 284, 47.
- Martin, J. (1999). *Miss Manner's Guide to Domestic Tranquility, The Authoritative Manual for Every Civilized Household, However Harried*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Meyer, C. (1997). *Blur: The Speed of Change in the Connected Economy*, New York: Warner Books.
- Mitchell, M. (2004). *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Etiquette, 3rd Edition*, USA: Alpha, a member Of Penguin Group.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Identity in Practice. Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and Identity*, New York: Cambridge University Press.